

CREATING AN ONLINE PRESENCE FOR A HIGH SCHOOL NEWSPAPER

A CREATIVE PROJECT

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

High school gives students an opportunity not only for learning but also for exploring opportunities for future careers. Over the last decade, the profession of journalism has changed dramatically, with newspaper employees now writing for both print and online media. In 2007, the *New York Times* online site was recognized as the largest newspaper website on the Internet. The executives of the *Times* merged its digital and print newsrooms in August 2005, and in 2007 they were increasing the training of print journalists in web-based skills such as the use of video cameras (Smolkin 22).

While the *New York Times* is recognized as a leader in news production, since 2005 many other city newspapers have followed the *Times*. In a 2006 article for *Quill* magazine, the *Bakersfield Californian* stated that it hired journalists to be more than print reporters. “They are expected to write Web bulletins and shoot audio and video.” The *Spartanburg Herald-Journal* in South Carolina stated that it needed reporters and photographers to be more aware of what they could do to add another dimension to their reporting to allow for multimedia coverage (“Ever-evolving newspaper” 16-17). In an effort to provide a realistic journalism experience, many high school newspapers have taken their publications online as well.

A review of online high school newspapers demonstrates the capability of these web publications to provide authentic journalism experiences for students. The Carmel

High School *HiLite Online* has been a National Scholastic Press Association Pacemaker award winner for several years. Notable features of the *HiLite* include pictures with each story, a link to view the most recent print edition, information on awards won under the “About Us” section, new posts approximately once a week, bylines with links to email addresses for readers to contact writers, online polls to encourage interactivity, and teasers in their print media to drive students to their online publication.

[Figure 1]

Francis Howell North High School in St. Charles, Missouri, is another Pacemaker winner with their online news called *FHNtoday.com*. In addition to many of the items found on the *HiLite*’s website such as a link to the school’s most recent print edition, the *FHNtoday.com* also had a tab on joining school publications and a tab on ordering the school yearbook.

[Figure 2]

In an effort to create an authentic journalism experience for newspaper students so that they can make educated decisions about possible future careers, secondary schools should offer online, as well as print media to its students. Prior to making the move to online reporting, a review of successful newspaper websites would benefit the publications program. What type of design will encourage readers to spend time on the site and to read the stories provided? What writing style would be best to inform readers and keep their interests? What actions will promote use of the online site for students, staff, and the local community? These factors were examined and considered when planning the researcher’s student newspaper online news site.

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

While news websites are readily available on the local and national levels, the academic evaluation of such sites is still in its early years. Still, several researchers have studied how news websites attract readers, structure and write stories for the web, and drive viewers to both their print and online products. In addition to reviewing these findings, in general, it is also helpful to know teen preferences on web design, writing, and marketing because they are the targeted audience for a high school news site.

#### *Design*

When a reader looks at a news website, the publisher wants him or her to stay on the site and browse the articles. The most recent Eyetrack study by Steve Outing and Laura Ruel showed that viewers have a strong preference for text over pictures with dominant headlines being the first item readers see when looking at a page, especially when that headline is in the upper left corner of the page. “The eyes most often fixated first in the upper left of the page, then hovered in that area before going left to right. Only after perusing the top portion of the page for some time did their eye explore further down the page” (Outing). Therefore, the most successful web design places the most important information at the top of the page, using meaningful words to attract attention.

With text, primarily in the form of headlines, being the starting point for web readers, designers work to make sure those words attract the reader's attention.

Researchers such as Jakob Nielsen, Steve Outing and Laura Ruel, and Jonathon and Lisa Price have found that readers scan and skim over their text. To make text scannable so that readers can find what they are interested in reading, Price and Price suggest that designers and writers "create a meaningful title," "insert meaningful headlines and subheadlines," "highlight key words and phrases—and links," and "turn any list into a bulleted or numbered list." As part of creating meaningful titles, headlines, and subheadlines, Nielsen states that the important words need to come first, called frontloading, so that the reader can understand the idea of the story from the first couple of words. "People typically scan down a list of headlines, and often don't view entire headlines. If the first words engage them, they seem likely to read on" (Outing). Highlighting words, phrases, and links, and making lists allows the reader to locate key words and consume the content they are interested in without having to read all of the information. According to research by Jakob Nielsen about teen website reading habits, teens do not like to read a lot on the web and do not like tiny font sizes. Once they find what they are interested in, they can go back and read the entire article.

While finding key words is the first action of a web viewer, pictures and graphics can help draw the reader into the page if done well. The Eyetracker study found that, even though images were not the first item a person looked at, images did receive "a significant number of eye fixations. We also learned that the bigger the image, the more time people took to look at it." Images at least 210 x 203 pixels were viewed more often than smaller images, and clear faces attracted more attention than other types of images

(Outing). News websites recognize these findings in research done by Martin Engebretsen on Scandinavian online news sites. Engebretsen found that most of the online stories contained photographs, with only twenty percent of the stories being text-only (9). In addition to capturing viewer's attention with text and photographs, interactivity was another important aspect of effective web design.

When people find a story or image they like, they often click on it to find out more; this is just one aspect of interactivity. According to research by Jakob Nielsen about teen website reading habits, teenagers like clean websites with "cool-looking" graphics and interactivity. Some of the interactive features Nielsen found effective included forms for providing feedback and asking questions, online polls and quizzes, features for sharing pictures and stories, and other features for sharing content. In general, using outbound hypertext links (links to other sites) adds credibility to the story. In Judy Gregory's May 2004 article in *Communication* magazine, she writes that the designer needs to be careful so that "each page should work as an independent segment because writers cannot assume that readers have seen pages higher in the structural hierarchy" (279). Therefore, interactivity not only makes the reader feel more active and engaged in the web page, it also makes the articles carry more credible.

While frontloading information, using meaningful images, and including interactive features apply to all pages on a website, there are additional considerations for a homepage. First of all, the Eyetrack study found that navigation placed at the top of a homepage is most effective. This navigation bar was seen by the most participants and looked at the longest (Outing). After reviewing the navigation bar and the top screen of the homepage, the Eyetrack study found that people did scroll down to the following



screens; however, they did more scanning, looking for something to grab their attention (Outing). This means that web designers put the most important information at the top and perform even more frontloading of important words in headlines as readers scan down the page. To try to attract reader's attention on the homepage, stories are often positioned by their timeliness rather than by their importance (De Waal 57). With the increased scanning as one reads down the screens, it is no surprise that blurbs on the homepage giving more detail about a story are not shown to be as effective. "Eyetrack III's bottom line on homepage 'blurbs' . . . seems to be that they sometimes get noticed, but usually only under certain complex circumstances" (Small). Designing a strong homepage to draw readers into the many stories on the page is considered one of the most important tasks in designing a web page for a high school newspaper.

### *Writing*

Design studies have shown that placing important, descriptive words first draws readers into a story; however, once the reader clicks on the link to the story, the writer must continue to keep the reader's attention. It is not enough to just take stories from a print article and shovel it onto the website (known as "shovelware"). In Engebretsen's research on Scandinavian online journalism, he found that less than 20 percent of the print stories reviewed have texts identical to what appears in the online version. Of the online stories reviewed, about sixty percent have fewer than 500 words. In addition, half of the online stories had two or fewer sources (6-8). Knowing that web stories are typically shorter than print stories, the writing for online stories is typically tighter than the writing for print. The Eyetrack study found that stories with short paragraphs had

more viewers than stories with longer paragraphs and that those stories in the one-column format had more viewers than stories in multiple columns (Outing). Nielsen has found that those short paragraphs need to have one idea that is understandable from the first few words in the paragraph and that the story overall should be written in the inverted pyramid style so that the most important information is first in the article. This means that passive voice may be acceptable in writing headlines, blurbs, and lead sentences (Nielsen). While writers should keep the writing tight, they do not want to cut too much and confuse the reader. Therefore, in writing for the web, it is necessary to avoid the use of semi-colons because the reader often misses them and gets lost in what appears to be a run-on sentence. It is also helpful to leave articles and relative pronouns (that, which, who) to guide the reader and establish relationships. Research also suggests keeping the sentence subject-verb-direct object, moving phrases after these parts of speech (Price). While the inverted pyramid structure is typical of journalism, other writing styles may be used on occasion to attract web readers.

While writing tight and short is important to maintaining the importance of the website reader, the journalist must also consider which stories will be most likely viewed on the web. De Waal's 2005 study of online newspapers found that this format is more suited to be used as a research medium since viewers often scan for particular subjects of interest and that they are used for breaking news (57-58). In addition, Tewkesbury's research on Internet news reading found that of the online news read, sports stories were the most often viewed. Readers also reported going online for entertainment news (703). Therefore, web news sites contain breaking news, sports, and features. As a research medium, it may also be beneficial to have blogs or updates on areas that high school

students want to know such as special programs offered, college admissions, and standardized testing. While knowing how to write for the web and what content will draw in readers, it is also important to make potential viewers aware of the website.

### *Marketing*

In an effort to encourage visitors to the newspaper website, one must consider that many of today's students are able to access the Internet at school, at home, and anywhere else using their smart phones. The researcher observes students connecting to the Internet, including accessing Facebook, Twitter, and other websites through school computers and smart phones. Marketing research has found that when social network users trust their "friends" in that network, they are more likely to rely on their friends' recommendations through this form of electronic word of mouth (Shu-Chuan 66). With numerous students communicating via social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter, having staff members promote their stories and photos through the student publication and personal staff social media accounts may also increase page hits.

FHS students already see the free print version of the school newspaper approximately once a month. "So far, visiting online newspapers does not seem to be a substitute for reading traditional newspapers" (De Waal 55). Research by Grusin and Edmondson on youth news moving online indicates that cross promotion is the most common way to try to drive traffic to the website. Other marketing methods include promotion through sponsoring school activities and running contests (94).

In addition to connecting to the school's target market through the use of social media and cross promotion, making the website highly visible in online search engines is

another strategy to draw viewers. The *New York Times* management is working to position the *Times*' community newspapers to appear within Google's top sites for that town or city (Smolkin 23).

### CHAPTER III

#### METHODOLOGY

To create a website for a secondary school newspaper that reflects the findings in the research, it is first necessary to know the basic steps. To this end, the researcher attended the Ball State University journalism adviser workshop called “Mastering the Web” offered June 24-26 and taught by Megan McNames, Assistant Director of Journalism Workshops. Over the course of the three days, participants learned about companies that host websites, content management systems such as WordPress, effective Web design and writing, and the basics of HTML code. As part of the workshop, each participant received an account through Dreamhost attached to the BSU Journalism Workshop’s domain of highschoolmedia.org and had the opportunity to choose from multiple WordPress theme templates. Based on research regarding viewer website preferences, the Tribune Theme from WPZoom was selected and specific tabs were created to encourage readers to explore the website. The draft website was created during and after this workshop using the stories and photos from the last regular issue of the newspaper during the 2010-11 school year. Blog topics were created based on the ideas of the researcher and filler pictures were used when necessary.

After the draft website was designed, teaching materials on writing for the web, a new distribution cycle, and marketing plan were also created. These items were based on the research found during the literature review and the information from McNames’

workshop and modified based on discussions with the editorial board of the FHS school newspaper. Students received specific training on writing stories for the web using the inverted pyramid style and on using fewer sources than required for print. Training regarding frontloading headlines was also provided. The existing three-week production cycle used by the staff was maintained, but staff writers were required to complete an online story, in addition to a print story, for each cycle. Staff photographers not writing an online story had to provide photo essays or videos for the newspaper website.

Planning and creating a draft website are key aspects of creating an authentic journalistic experience for the high school students. To ensure that the students found the experience authentic and incorporated the online site into its ongoing schedule, the researcher also followed their work on the website through the production cycles. This included working with the web editor and photographers on making the most of the design allowed by the template chosen, working with the writers on creating stories that appeal to web readers, and working with the business manager on driving readers to the website.

While the teaching materials and distribution cycle have been implemented, the researcher and editorial board are finding challenges in implementing all of their ideas in design, writing, and marketing of the website given the demands on the time of the nineteen member staff who also produce a print edition of the paper, attend at least five other classes, and have extracurricular work. The execution of the online news website, including the achievements in design and writing will be discussed, along with the future goals for design, writing, and marketing. It is understood by the researcher and student

staff members that the Fishers High School online news site is a work-in-progress and requires an ongoing commitment to realize its full potential.

## CHAPTER IV

### BODY OF THE PROJECT

The development and implementation of a secondary school online website for a student staff to maintain as part of a newspaper publication class required research of existing secondary school websites and best practices in designing, writing, and marketing. As a result of the initial work by the researcher and the feedback from the student staff, the following decisions were made regarding the Fishers High School *N the Red* online news site.

#### *Design*

The Tribune Theme by WPZoom used as the design template for the online news site contained many of the elements recommended by the current research. Text is the most important element in the template, with large headlines and short blurbs for the main stories in each section of the homepage. Headline text is also highlighted to make it easy to identify. In keeping with readers' tendency to scan websites, the most important stories, news articles, are located at the top of the page, followed by sports, features and other news items as the reader scrolls down the page. Headlines are also frontloaded for ease in scanning, with the most important information first. Fonts are easy to read, with the largest fonts at the top of the page. For those readers who respond to images, there is the opportunity for a featured image with each story.



In keeping with the Eyetrack study findings on homepages and navigation, the Tribune Theme also allows for the navigation bar at the top of the homepage. The section tabs created follow the order of the sections found most frequently updated and read, including news, features, photo essays, sports, opinion, and blogs. The tab “About Us” features profiles on each of the staff members, editorial policies, and awards won, emulating the Carmel *HiLite* online newspaper. The final tab, “Join Publications” provides readers with a copy of the student publications application, similar to the information found on the Francis Howell North High School online newspaper. Imitating the *FHNtoday.com* site, the *N the Red* site also has an ad that links to the order form for the high school yearbook.

[Figure 3]

Additional features of the *N the Red* website design also reflect similarities with award-winning secondary school newspapers and the prevailing wisdom on web design. The entire website positions stories by recentness, as do the majority of online news sources, be they school-related or professional. As seen in the Carmel *HiLite*, the *N the Red* site provides access to the print editions through a link to the PDF on Issuu.com, found on the right side of every page labeled “Most Recent Issue.”

[Figure 4]

The staff page also lists the students’ email address so that readers can contact the writers similar to the Carmel *HiLite*. Readers also have interactivity through the ability to comment on individual stories and the “You-Pick-Review” box at the top of the page.

[Figure 5]

The only aspect of the WPZoom theme that does not reflect the research on web design is the use of blurbs on the homepage. While the research shows that blurbs are less effective as one scans down the page, the homepage of the *N the Red* site has blurbs for all stories featured there. However, when the reader clicks to the different tabs, such as the features page, only the most recent story has a blurb, with older stories simply showing the headline and featured image. Because the majority of the WordPress theme contained the elements desired for the school news site, this was considered an inconsequential negative, especially since the research shows that blurbs can be effective in some complex situations.

[Figure 6]

The design of the online newspaper is still some weak on interactivity. The researcher and student web editor have discussed adding online polls, more outbound hypertext links, and other interactive features to the site. As the staff becomes more comfortable with the site, it is anticipated that more of these features will be implemented.

### *Writing*

Of all the areas of the new website, writing required the most staff training. The website design is handled primarily by the student web editor, with help from the photo editor and adviser, but writing the stories for the site is the combined responsibility of fifteen of the nineteen staff members. At the beginning of the school year, the adviser used materials from the Ball State University workshop and online sources to set the expectations for stories and writing. While print stories required approximately 500

words or more, online stories are to be kept between 100 and 300 words as often as possible. Although the publication classes' standard is three different sources and four quotes for print stories, one to two sources are deemed acceptable for online stories. Inverted pyramid structure and frontloaded headlines were also part of the training for staff members. Staff members have followed these changes for the most part, as seen in the example.

[Figure 7]

Research on website writing also examined which stories generated the greatest interest, such as sports, features, and breaking news. While the breaking news format has yet to be implemented, the majority of stories for the online website deal with sports and features or news of group activities that are of specific interest to the target audience of high school students. In addition, visually appealing details such as a one-column format and use of highlighting have been implemented. The sports story about the three quarterbacks reflects several of these elements of visual interest.

[Figure 8]

Finally, to keep readers returning, frequent updates to the site must be made. Looking at award-winning sites such as the Carmel *HiLite* and the *FHNtoday.com*, it is common to make updates online once a week, much more frequently than print editions appear. The *N the Red* staff is working on a schedule that calls for rolling online story deadlines during the print news cycle. This worked for the first two print cycles, but the staff has struggled since then. Based on research, the staff should also consider adding more blogs. They are considering adding a guidance office blog by one of the copy editors and seeing if a teacher would like to contribute to another blog.

[Figure 9]

### *Marketing*

The final area of research and implementation was marketing the website. The nineteen-student staff works on the *N the Red* site, but they want to make sure that the target readers view their efforts. First steps toward increasing the visibility of the site were taken before the beginning of the school year. They included having a link from the Fishers High School website ([www.hse.k12.in.us/fhs/](http://www.hse.k12.in.us/fhs/)) to the new *N the Red* site ([www.fishers.hightschoolmedia.org](http://www.fishers.hightschoolmedia.org)). In addition, based on the suggestion of McNames at the workshop, the name Fishers High School was used numerous times in the setup of the site. This has helped the *N the Red* site's position on Google. When "Fishers High School" is Googled, it appears at the bottom of the second page of listings. When "Fishers High School newspaper" is Googled, it appears in the middle of the second page of listings. The staff is making efforts to see the site move up over time.

The business manager is responsible for promoting the online newspaper to students. To improve ease of finding the FHS school newspaper website, the business manager's first suggestion was to add another URL to link to the current site. The original URL for the FHS *N the Red* online newspaper is was established for the Ball State University workshop but is not intuitive for readers searching the Internet. The newspaper staff purchased [www.nthered.org](http://www.nthered.org) and had it redirect to the original URL. When new online stories are posted, the business manager works with the staff members to tweet the new story on the *N the Red* Twitter feed and the writer's Twitter Feed. He

also asks students to post updates to their Facebook pages and asks the editor-in-chief to post an update to the *N the Red* Facebook page.

It has always been the intention of the staff to run contests and cross promote the website as well. The business manager created T-shirts with the [www.nthered.org](http://www.nthered.org) name. Beginning November 3, the daily announcements told students about contests running every few weeks asking students to go to the online new site to post comments to enter for the chance to win one of these T-shirts. The first contest ended November 11 with the award of T-shirts to three students who provided a constructive comment on any story on the website. By promoting the website on the announcements and giving away T-shirts with the website URL, the staff hopes to increase student awareness. The cross promotion has been more of a struggle. While it has not been done in the first three print issues, it has been discussed on more than one occasion. For the fourth print issue, the doubletruck feature on the student musical and the story on student health will reference additional content on the *N the Red* website and include a QR code that takes smart phones to the *N the Red* homepage where the related content can be found. Other students are considering similar print and online packaging in order to promote the website and to make it easier to meet their requirement for producing a print and online story each news cycle.

Google Analytics is being used to track the success of the various marketing programs attempted by the business manager and staff. Since the site's creation in June, the most traffic to the website occurred when students first began posting to the site and talked, tweeted, and posted the most about their new online stories. The majority of traffic came from referring sites which would be the Fishers High School homepage. The

link from [www.nthred.org](http://www.nthred.org) was not up and running until after this date, so it will be interesting to see if more traffic comes directly through the new URL since the contests and cross promotion will refer the audience to that location. The business manager hopes that the efforts at promotion through social media posts, contests and the print edition will bring those numbers up. The business manager and adviser will continue to monitor Google Analytics over the course of the year to determine which marketing techniques work best.

[Figure 10]

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATION FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

As a result of this research project, Fishers High School follows in the footsteps of many other secondary schools by offering an online component to its student newspaper publications class. Through research on news website best practices and the creation of the site at the summer adviser workshop at Ball State University, the *N the Red* online newspaper contains many of the same characteristics found on award-winning secondary school news sites. In particular, reviewer Jim Streisel of the Carmel High School *Hilite* found that the clean format, ease of navigation, eye-catching photographs, and headline writing were strong attributes of the new website. Other researched website best practices that implemented on the *N the Red* site include posting most recent stories at the top, using colors and font sizes to indicate importance, using tight, short writing, and avoiding “shovelware” of print stories onto the online site.

Nthered.org has only been active and updated for three months. While many researched best practices have been implemented, others still need to put in place. Adding more interactive features, updating stories more frequently, including more videos and slideshows, and adding “breaking” news are all in the planning stages. Streisel also recommended adding a “Home” button on the navigation bar at the top, adding a photo of the day, and adding an events calendar. The web editor is considering

all of these suggestions. The business manager also wants to do more cross promotion and contests to improve hits to the site.

Reviewer Chris Corbit of the Hamilton Southeastern School district suggested explaining or modifying the “Red Hot Comments” on the right side of the page and disabling the comments. While the suggestion on the “Red Hot Comments” will be taken to the web editor, allowing comments is intentional. The web editor reviews and approves all comments before they are posted to the live web article. Although more spam is received than any other type of comment, comments are being used by the staff to run contests, request ideas for story topics, and monitor what readers like and dislike about the new site.

Researching news website best practices is still in its early years and was instrumental in the development of the Fishers High School online student news site. Future research could focus on whether the researched best practices of professional news website design and writing apply equally to secondary school news sites. Do high school students react favorably to the same design and story elements that the population at large does? The biggest challenge for the N the Red staff has been attracting readers to the new site. Additional research could also be done on what drives high school readers to online news sites. The implementation of secondary school news websites would benefit from follow-up research on what works for their particular demographic.



## CHAPTER VI

### OUTSIDE REVIEWS

Two individuals were asked to review the Fishers High School student newspaper website based on their understanding of online websites, school communities, and journalism. Chris Corbit is the Web Services Specialist for Hamilton Southeastern Schools, the district in which Fishers High School is located. Jim Streisel is the adviser of Carmel High School's print and online student newspapers. As mentioned in the introduction, the Carmel High School online newspaper consistently wins national awards for design and content. Each reviewer's comments are provided in the exact format they were provided to the researcher.

*Review by Chris Corbit, 24 August 2011*

#### **Evaluator's Credentials**

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Name: Chris Corbit

Education: B.S. in Computer Technology, IUPUI

A+ / Network+ Certified

MCTS Sharepoint Administrator

Field Experience:      Lead webmaster / software engineer / DBA for Hamilton  
Southeastern Schools (6 years)

**Evaluation of the newspaper website as appropriate for my work as a high school newspaper adviser**

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This is absolutely appropriate and worth pursuing. Putting the school newspaper online is not only a great way to get news out to the public, but also a potential opportunity to raise funds for the paper.

**Evaluation of the Student's Approach to the Project**

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From my understanding, the approach included the following:

- Attended a workshop at Ball State
- Used WordPress to develop the site
- Obtained host address from Ball State and published site
- Used material from the last print edition

This is a great start. It looks like you closely mimicked other newspaper sites such as the Indy Star with having a home page that has “portals” to other areas of the site. You

might consider finishing the content and giving it a test run with some students to see what they think.

WordPress is a great place to start. Later, as the project becomes more involved, you might look into learning some HTML and CSS code to customize it even further.

### **Evaluation of the Body of the Project**

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It looks to me like you have put a lot of thought in how to get the site to actually mirror the paper itself. The navigation across the top is like tabbing through the different sections of the paper.

One picky thing to note would be that the right column on the bottom half of the site, there is a section for archives. This seems to be a general archive of all of the older articles, not just the ones for a specific area. For example, if I was in sports and I clicked on the June 2011 archives, I would expect to see sports archives only. This wouldn't be a problem right now, but if you have 12 months worth of archived news in there, it might be difficult to sift through. This actually is most likely more of a limitation of using WordPress (which is a blogging tool more than anything).

Red Hot Topics section is a good idea, but I think it should be formatted a little differently. It looks like one giant paragraph.

There were some areas without content (some blogs, staff section, etc) but I am assuming that is because they are under construction!

Another picky thing is when you go to each section, there is a highlighted article at the top with a picture and two columns of text. You might consider just making that a single column instead if possible. It forces itself to spread onto two columns and leaves some odd gaps if the article's abstract is short.

Speaking as a web admin, you may want to disable comments. It's a full time job patrolling those things for inappropriate comments.

Overall, nice work! Some small things that stick out, but they are all personal design preferences. Technically, the work is very sound. It shows up properly on all the major web browsers. It's obvious you put some time and thought into it.

*Review by Jim Streisel, 24 October 2011*

**Evaluator's credentials (knowledge and experience of the subject area - in this case web design and work with the school system):**

Jim Streisel, HiLite adviser and communications teacher, Carmel (IN) High School. I advise the HiLite Online and I wrote an ebook on the subject of web journalism titled *Scholastic Web Journalism: Connecting with Readers in a Digital Age* (McFarland 2009)

**Elements I liked:**

1. Excellent, clean design. Too often, news websites are cluttered with too much unnecessary information. Your site is contemporary and clean, which makes it easy to navigate. The white space you've purposely left adds to that clean navigation. Keep up the good work here and only add new features (plugins, widgets) if they are absolutely necessary to get information out quickly and efficiently to readers.
2. Excellent headline writing. I know this may seem trivial, but too many sites forget that their readers are scanners; as such, catchy titles just don't work. It's imperative to use great summarizing headlines (subject, verb, object construction) to share the main idea/angle/news value of each story.
3. Navigation that makes sense. You've titled each section in your website clearly. Using the straightforward terms of "news," "feature," "sports," etc. makes good sense. You'd be surprised how many sites confuse their readers with hard-to-

understand monikers or who add too many items in their navigation bars. That just turns readers off.

4. Ways to share information. I like the widget for each post that allows readers to like it on Facebook, share it on Twitter, email it, etc. Those items are extremely important in this new wave of social media/Web 2.0. So many readers now get their news “sideways” (via Facebook, Twitter), and having those tools facilitates that sharing.
5. Not using the rotating carousel for top news stories. Too many sites use one of those at the top of their site, but they don’t use it well. For one, it’s sometimes hard to find enough new content to fill the carousel. I like that you’ve chose to just put one story at a time at the top of your site. That allows you to manually change it out when the news changes.
6. The Red Hot Topics box. But perhaps add a little blurb to explain how those appear? (i.e. most popular? Most searches? Number of clicks?)

**Suggestions for improvement:**

1. More content. Your site looks great, so now it’s time to populate it with new information. After all, a website is only as good as the information that’s there. As I look at the site, I notice that the Opinion section has nothing new since June 26, Sports has nothing new since Sept. 16 and there have only been four new posts in

all of October. I also notice that most of the posts on your site correspond with a print deadline (Oct. 8, Sept. 16). That has to change if you want readers to come back to your site. Try to get something new on the site at least a couple times per week if not once per day. Some suggestions to help:

- a. Establish a beat system where your reporters cover some area of the school (i.e. student government, clubs and activities, sports teams, etc.) on a regular basis...say, once every three weeks. These don't have to be long – just a quick, inverted pyramid story previewing upcoming events.
  - b. Photo of the day. Photographers could be assigned to take one newsworthy photo per day to be uploaded to a prominent place on the site.
  - c. An events calendar. There are lots of widgets for this using WordPress, but it's basically a sport where you can provide all of the dates, times and locations of upcoming meeting, sporting events, etc.
  - d. Social media. If you don't have a Facebook page or a Twitter account, you should see about getting one. They're a great way to quickly share announcements and short pieces of news (as well as link to larger stories)
2. Home button. You need to add one to the left of your "news" tab in the navigation bar. I know clicking the logo takes me back to the home page, but it's one of those little touches that readers expect on a website.
  3. Add more info to your interior pages. "About us" has only one post about the editor in chief. You should add something about your staff, your editorial policies, your submission procedures, etc. "Blogs" only has one post (listed as "IB

experience” but I’m not sure how the story there – about an exchange student – ties in with that theme). Keep developing these voices.

4. Pictures. I like that most of your stories actually have photos to go with them.

That actually helps readership (a story with a picture is almost twice as likely to be read as a story without one), but sometimes (for example, with breaking news) a story won’t be able to have a picture. You need to figure out how to remove the gray “no picture” box for those stories that don’t have one. Leaving the blank box in makes the page seem incomplete. I’m OK with not always having a picture, but don’t leave the gray box in if you don’t have to. Perhaps you could make a smaller box on the side just for “latest headlines;” that way you can provide just those headlines (which should be updated often) and they don’t necessarily need pictures.



## CHAPTER VII

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